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ABSTRACT

This document discusses a study that addresses why transfer students choose a particular university to continue their education in. Furthermore, the study attempts to identify the types of recruitment strategies that are most effective in persuading students to attend a certain university. The study's sample came from 475 volunteers who attended a transfer session. It was composed of 70% female and 30% male. The following are some of the conclusions made by authors: (1) universities should continue to promote social and academic factors in recruiting activities; (2) transfer students should be recruited from community colleges as enthusiastically as possible; (3) universities should continue to recruit transfer students with the use of videos and tours; (4) universities need to continue to increase financial aid funds to meet increases in tuition; and (5) universities need to keep up with changes in the characteristics and needs of community college students. The document concludes by observing that transfer students are important because they make up a large part of upper division student populations, they fill gaps left by attrition, and fulfill the missions of community colleges by transferring successfully. Therefore, the authors conclude that universities and community colleges should work together to ensure a successful transfer for students. (Contains 19 references.) (MZ)

Transferring from community college to university: How choices are influenced

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Abstract

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Exploring student's reasons for choosing upper division universities to complete their education is important to enrollment management, recruiters and liaisons. What factors do students consider when selecting a university? Are these alike or different from what we know about FTIC students. This single institution case study sought to identify the piece of the puzzle relating to the reasons transfer students selected a particular university to continue their education. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-phase model, Davis and Guppy (1997) socio-economic (finances) model and Lynch's (1996) perception model were used as the theoretical framework. The results have application to enrollment management.

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Transferring from community college to university: How choices are influenced

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The question of transfer of community college students to universities has been of interest for some time. Lee, Mackie-Lewis and Marks (1993) report in their article that the range is about 30-40% although more than 70% of students say they are planning to transfer. It is not clear how many students transfer, but it is clear they do. In Florida with its 2+2 higher education system, 60% of students begin their studies at the community college, 70% of Associate in Arts degree graduates transfer to a state university within 5 years (Florida Department of Education, 2003). To meet the needs of the growing number of high school graduates seeking higher education, the transfer function of the community college has remained one of its primary missions (in addition to occupations, remedial, and general education) since its inception. Included in its mission statements, the community college often lists for example, "to serve as an entry-point for baccalaureate degree programs by providing the first two years of a four year curriculum . . ." (Broward Community College Mission Statement, p.1).

Accountability measures in place in Florida with performance incentive funding reward institutions for articulation (Florida Department of Education, 2003). Receiving

transfer students at universities is important to maintain upper division enrollments and to add to the overall mix of students completing baccalaureate degrees. Without successful transfers, fewer baccalaureate degrees would be granted and fewer citizens would advance to graduate study. The Florida State University System (SUS) believes strongly in this function and has implemented a system of articulation officers at each of its 11 universities.

While early literature about transfer students indicated they were less likely to persist to earn the bachelor's degree, new data no longer supports this notion. (Lee, Mackie-Lewis & Marks, 1993). In fact, in Florida's State University System (SUS), when compared to First Time in College (FTIC), AA transfer students exceed retention and graduation rates at all 11 universities. There are many reasons students begin their post-secondary education at the community college but as we consider increasing tuition rates, it is likely more students will be forced to do so. Community colleges usually charge lower fees, students can live at home to save money, class sizes are often smaller, scholarships are available specifically for transfer students, personalized advising is more readily available, and above all students can get a quality education.

While many studies have focused on the aggregate of transfer students; i.e. admission numbers, retention, and graduation, few studies have focused on individual student's reasons for choosing specific upper division universities to complete their education. What factors do they consider when selecting a university? Are these alike or different from what we know about FTIC students? Today's students have access to a number of resources to help them make informed choices for obtaining their degree and many have become educated consumers, what ones are more effective? While obtaining

the credential is important, obtaining the credential from the correct university is even more important. This study seeks to determine the reasons community college students selected the specific upper division college to attend. The results of this study can be used by recruiters and liaisons to actively recruit community college transfer students. Because the AA degree provides them with the credential that opens the door to all of the state universities and because universities want to survive by keeping enrollments within the corridor, the more we know about our potential students, the better equipped we will be to attract them to our programs.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this single institution case study was to explore the factors community college students consider most important in selecting a university to complete their undergraduate work and to determine how transfer students rate the university they chose in comparison to the characteristics they believe important. In addition, the study attempted to identify the types of recruitment strategies that were most important in their choices.

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of college choice is not a new area. Prior to the 1980s, colleges began to be more interested in college choice as more and more colleges and universities competed for the same students. Studies began to be reported at the beginning of the decade. A brief discussion of college choice theories and the characteristics college students consider is offered.

College Choice

Early work by Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982) set the foundation of study of college student choice, describing it as a developmental process. Jackson (1982) along with Litten (1982) suggest the process has three phases. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) explored related literature on student choice in an attempt to explain how factors interact to influence student's attitudes toward college and shape the selection of a specific institution. Based on the characteristics of student choice, they designed a three-phase model to include predisposition, search and choice. For FTIC students, the search phase was the one they suggested as most critical. Davis and Guppy (1997) tied socio-economic background (finances) to a major decision factor in college choice. Examining perceptions of universities through visits to campus and reflection of contact with the institution was the heart of Lynch's 1996 study. Rosovsky (1990) was clear that students form perceptions based on what they know about universities, what they have read, what others have told them. Surette (1997) presented a transfer model. This model describes a decision about subsequent schooling on having previously chosen to attend two-year college. The model was applied on women to determine why their transfer rate was lower than men. Since most of these studies were done using high school students selecting a college, it is important to determine if these same factors exist for community college students transferring to the university.

Characteristics of influence

Which characteristics of the college are more important to students seeking admission? While choice theories established the developmental process, specific characteristics seemed to bubble up in level of importance. Clearly financial resources

became important. College costs were rising and without financial aid packages, middle income students were unable to attend.

Chapman (1981) identified external characteristics as well as student characteristics. External characteristics included significant persons, characteristics of the institution and effort of the institution to communicate. Student characteristics included socioeconomic status, aptitude, aspiration, H.S. performance, fixed college characteristics of cost, financial aid, location and desired courses/programs, and communication efforts. Cocchi (1997) reviewed factors that can influence the community college choice as a resource of learning disabled students. His list of 10 includes: location, cost, peers, open enrollment, no entrance exams, programs of study, class size, course offerings, length of program and support. Are these same factors influencing transfer students?

Maxwell (1992) identified transfer student patterns and attitudes of students who moved from urban to suburban community colleges. Academic factors rated the highest in their choice decision. Monroe and Richtig (2002) found a similar factor of the academic program being the most important for those intending to transfer. Wajeed and Micceri's study comparing college choices of traditional universities and a metropolitan universities revealed "good academic reputation" as a top indicator for traditional students but "availability of major" as the top indicator for freshman in the metropolitan university, both academic indicators and "wanted to be near home" (social) for the total student body of the metropolitan university.

Communication

Kellaris and Kellaris studied 188 new students at a small church affiliated college to determine the extent of perceived influence of college contacts as well as the perceived

usefulness. This population rated campus visits as the most important communication tool influencing their decision. Enrollment decisions were made by first-hand impressions and recommendations of others.

Finances

College costs have been increasing steadily for the past several decades. In order for students from lower and middle socio-economic backgrounds to attend colleges, financial aid is critical. Davis and Guppy (1997) did extensive work in fields of study, college selectivity and student inequalities. Their study using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth examined the process by which students enter lucrative fields of study, selective colleges and lucrative fields within selective colleges. The caution that "student access to selective schools will become increasingly stratified if tuition continues to rise, and grants, loans, and scholarship programs continue to be eroded." P. 1434. Maxwell (1992) reported on studies of researchers in the 80's "that the number for whom cost is the most important factor range between 15% and 65%." (p. 240). The data for today's college student may be even higher. In the Wajeih and Micceri (1997) study "low tuition/cost" was of great influence for both the traditional and metropolitan universities.

Methods

This case study was designed to explore the reasons community college students selected the specific upper-division university to attend. While a number of factors were identified in the literature, this study was most interested in specific institutional characteristics and how they related to the selection of the university.

Setting

Florida International University is a large urban university in South Florida. It is described as a minority-majority university. It is classified as a Doctoral Research University-Extensive (DRU-E) by the Carnegie classifications. It accepts the majority of its transfer students from Miami-Dade Community College.

Data collection

Data were collected using a survey instrument, *Admitted Student Questionnaire*. Questions were selected to determine the importance of specific institutional characteristics in choosing a university to complete a bachelor's degree. Students were also asked to rate the university on the same characteristics. Data were analyzed for two groups of students, those who selected the university as their first choice and those for which it was not the first choice but attended anyway. Students were also asked to identify the quality of information sources they received. Minimal demographic data was collected to allow correlations with race, gender, resident status, socioeconomic status, academic level and proximity to campus all suggested in the literature as factors in selection.

Data analysis

A combination of descriptive statistics, frequencies, mean scores, t-tests, cross-tab correlations and factor analysis were used to analyze the data. Data were entered into SPSS for manipulation.

Results

Incoming transfer students to one university were surveyed during voluntary orientation sessions. A total of 475 students completed the surveys over two terms.

Students were asked about the importance of specific institutional characteristics in their choice of the university. These same characteristics were used to rate the university they selected. Comparisons were made between importance in choice and how they rated the university (perceptions) they selected. In addition data were gathered on means of communication and financial situation of these students.

Demographics

The population of this study was a convenience sample of 475 community college transfer students who attended a transfer orientation session voluntarily. The sample was 70% female and 30% male. Seventy percent classified themselves as juniors, 26% classified themselves as freshman or sophomores. The majority of the students were Florida residents with only 68 indicating non-Florida residency. Sixty-two were non-resident aliens and 103 were resident aliens. Eighty percent live less than 50 miles from the campus. Only 73 students planned to live on campus. The majority of the transfer students were Hispanic (50%) followed by 21% White non-Hispanic, 16% Black, 10% other, 3% Asian and less than 1% American Indian. The majority reported they were B (61%) and A (29%) students. They were using multiple sources of funding for their education ranging from employer's tuition benefit, savings, family/friends, institutional aid, current income and loans or parent assistance. Financial aid categories were 30 work on campus, 44 merit-based scholarship, 92 student loan and 120 needs based.

Factors of choice of the institution

Most of the items were marked important to very important in the choice of the target university. Of those students who selected the target university as their first choice, the mean scores on the Likert scale of 1-4 (1 being not important) ranged from 3.07 to

3.69. Of those students who selected the target university as their second or third choice, the mean scores on the Likert scale of 1-4 (1 being not important) ranged from 3.16 –

3.69. Only 3 items presented a significant difference between these 2 groups using t-test. These were a). reputation of the university, b). personal attention to students, and c). student faculty ratio. While there was a difference between the groups, it was weak that it did not seem to identify the major reason. Whether the transfer student selected the target university as their first or subsequent choice, the reasons were essentially ranked the same.

Rating of the University

When students were asked to rate the target university on the 18 indicators, the results were much the same as those indicated as important in their choice. Again, most of the items were marked important to very important in the rating of the target university. Of those students who selected the target university as their first choice, the mean scores on the Likert scale of 1-4 (1 being not important) rating university characteristics ranged from 3.12 to 3.69. Of those students who selected the target university as their second or third choice, the mean scores on the Likert scale of 1-4 (1 being not important) rating the university characteristics ranged from 3.16 – 3.69. Only 2 items presented a significant difference between these 2 groups using t-test. These were a). reputation of the university, b). personal attention to students. While there was a difference between the groups, it was weak that it did not seem to identify the major rating of importance. Whether the transfer student selected the target university as their first or subsequent choice, the indicators they felt were important in selecting an upper division university were essentially ranked the same.

Factor Analysis

A principal components extraction with a varimax rotation converged in 5 iterations. Three components yielded the factor structure. The first structure focused on choice of the institution to continue their education. Factor 1 represented social factors as contributing to the variance, Factor 2 was academic and Factor 3 was a mixture of affective factors. The factor structure for importance again presented Factor 1 as social, Factor 2 as academic but more mixed with affective items and Factor 3 as academic and financial. Factor structures are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

Rotated Component Matrix - College Choice

	Component		
	1	2	3
Access to off-campus cultural & rec. activities	.779	.182	.087
Quality of social life	.776	.193	.073
Diversity of student body	.712	.222	.122
Availability of recreational facilities on campus	.677	.304	.032
Quality of on-campus housing	.661	.047	.040
Attractiveness of the campus	.640	.236	.249
Opportunities to participate in extra-curr. activities	.597	-.083	.057
Financial aid package	.364	.295	.210
Availability of majors that interest you	-.034	.698	.107
Availability of internships/research or career opps.	.192	.676	.029
Personal attention to students	.196	.648	.094
Quality of academic facilities	.216	.643	.203
Academic reputation	.089	.555	.176
Student-faculty ratio	.245	.459	.384
Distance from home	-.006	.052	.807
Location of campus	.057	.163	.740
Value for the price	.202	.179	.678
Safety of campus/campus security	.218	.384	.480

Communications

All of the sources of information were deemed important by 90% or more of the participants. This included orientations, videos, campus tours, visitations to the

community college campus, open houses. Students were given an opportunity to make additional comments regarding communications. A sampling of responses revealed:

"Your website is pretty outdated in some areas. Faculty info, health dept: info, immunizations, etc." "Very Poor communication when I was accepted. I never received anything from the school. I had to call multiple times to find out my info. And the staff had problems answering questions." "I really wish FIU would have contacted me to help me through admissions it took me 4 phone calls to tell them I was a Transfer and not a Freshman."

Table 2

Rotated Component Matrix -Institutional qualities

	Component		
	1	2	3
Access to off-campus cultural & rec. activities	.771	.302	.200
Diversity of student body	.739	.333	6.907E-02
Quality of on-campus housing	.738	8.217E-02	5894E-02
Opportunities to participate in extra-curr. activities	.733	.263	.172
Quality of social life	.716	.326	.264
Availability of recreational facilities on campus	.708	8.569E-02	.365
Attractiveness of the campus	.660	.137	.368
Student-faculty ratio	.314	.709	.138
Value for the price	.238	.703	.207
Location of campus	.231	.684	.233
Distance from home	.106	.683	4.707E-2
Safety of campus/campus security	.301	.580	.345
Personal attention to students	5.400E-02	.556	.476
Availability of majors that interest you	.161	8.010E-02	.771
Availability of internships/research or career opps.	9.651E-02	.214	.706
Academic reputation	.230	.159	.699
Quality of academic facilities	.286	.231	.647
Financial aid package	3.14	.363	.492

Financial

Little information was gained regarding finances as an indicator of student's choice of the institution in this survey. Those students who needed financial aid rated it as important in their decision. Those who did not need financial aid did not rate it as more important in their decision.

Discussion

The transfer students in this study are not remarkable from students in other studies that have been reported. The students in this study were transferring to an urban, majority-minority university from community colleges.

Choice

These transfer students rated all of the characteristics they used in selecting this university as important or very important. They do not make much distinction in the reasons for their choice of university nor in the importance of the choice characteristics identified in the literature. Clearly university characteristics that could be described as social are more important, unlike entering freshman who tend to consider academic programs and financial aid as important. Perhaps since these students have clearly decided on their goal of a college education and have experience navigating the system, they are looking for other characteristics for satisfaction on their choice, they are clearly looking for the social experience. While academics are important, they tend to cluster in the second tier. It is possible that transfer students are not as methodological in

their choice decisions as students who enter college at the freshman level (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982).

Institutional qualities

This transfer student population rated social characteristics of a university as important in their consideration. Such things as access to off-campus cultural and recreational activities, diversity of the student body, quality of on-campus housing (although only 73 indicated they were going to live on campus), opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, quality of social life, availability of recreational facilities on campus and attractiveness of the campus. Academic and affective characteristics cluster in the second and third tier even though the factors between choice and importance shifted in factors 2 and 3 with more academic factors ending up in factor structure 3 i.e., availability of majors, internships, reputation, academic facilities and financial aide packages. These findings are consistent with the Wajeeh and Micceri (1997) study.

Communication and Financial

Colleges and universities spend great sums of money on recruitment materials, brochures, videos, web sites, etc. It is important to do member checking or even a cost-benefit analysis periodically. This study attempted to determine from transfer students what they felt about a number of communication tools used by the university in recruiting them to the university. Over 90% reported a high level of satisfaction with this means of communication. Since the data were self reported on a Likert scale instrument this should not be considered a scientific study of this means of student contact.

Financial aid packages have always been important to students attending college. As the cost of tuition increases, this is likely to become more evident. For this group of transfer students, financial aid is important as well. What is not surprising is the direct correlation to need and importance; those most in need rank financial items as more important in their choice of a university as well as within the characteristics of the university itself.

Summary and Recommendations

This study sought to identify the piece of the puzzle relating to the reasons transfer students selected a particular university to continue their education. The sample in this study was taken from those who voluntarily attended a transfer session. While the results did not reveal much statistical significance, the factor analysis helps to give a better picture of the transfer student at this university. The results have application to the practice of recruitment of transfer students at this university.

1. Continue to promote social factors in recruiting activities
2. Continue to promote academic factors in recruiting activities. If academics are more important to the university such as for DRU-E, institutions should emphasize it more.
3. Transfer students should be recruited from the local Community College as vigorously as possible; they make up a large number of transfer students.
4. Continue to market to transfer students with videos, tours, etc., as they all seem to be important.
5. As tuition costs rise, universities will need to increase financial aid packages as many more students will be dependant upon them.

6. Take periodic snapshots of student population to see if they have changed and adjust activities as necessary. Student profiles have been changing in recent years. The community college transfer student may be changing as well
7. If what you are doing is working, continue to spend the money if you are getting the results you desire.

Transfer students are important to the overall upper division student population. Transfer students fill the gaps left by attrition. Students who transfer to the university fulfil the mission of the community college. Universities should work with their feeder colleges to insure transfer students are ready for the transfer. Students who transfer with the AA or AS degree in Florida contribute to the performance funding formula for the community college and thus should be encouraged to receive the degree before transfer. While it is possible to transfer early, both the college and the student may be at a disadvantage. The students in this study seem positive about the transfer process.

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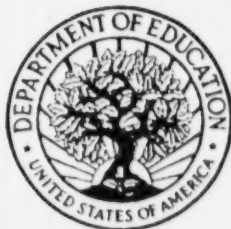
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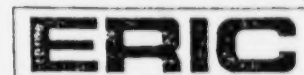
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